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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the incompatibility between the goal of communicative competence (defined more narrowly as minimal approximative communicative competence) and current practices of syllabus design, and suggests more relevant alternatives. Foreign language instruction is still dominated by the teaching of language structure for its own sake, and syllabus design practices give too central a place to structural features of language. Syllabus design comprises two phases, selection of appropriate items and ordering of the items. As far as selection is concerned, it is suggested that semantically based categories, modal categories, and categories of social function should be used, rather than features that refer strictly to linguistic form. Textual syntactic features, such as topicalization and focusing, are important indicators of how language is being used, and should also be considered. As far as ordering is concerned, four directions can be followed in judging the relative simplicity of pedagogical sequences: (1) frequency and utility of given forms, (2) intralingual analysis, (3) language acquisition universals, and (4) learner systems. (CIK)

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Communicative Competence and Syllabus Design

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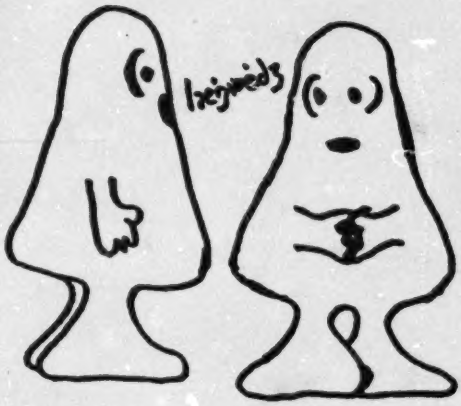

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Communicative competence is one of the most currently "in" labels in the field of foreign language (FL) instruction. It was first launched by Sandra J. Savignon[1] who defined it as follows:

> Communicative competence may be defined as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting, that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational output, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors.

Savignon then proceeded to mention several typical communicative situations: "How successful would an individual be, for example, in getting directions to the nearest pharmacy? Could he make introductions at a dinner party?" The meaning of the term has continued to drift, so that it has now become synonymous with the attainment of minimal speaking proficiency.

In the usage of the sociolinguists who first introduced it, communicative competence contrasted with the Chomskyan linguistic competence, and it symbolized a widening of the scope of linguistics to account for the use of language in situation. In its original acceptation, communicative competence subsumed the ability to interpret accurately and to correctly produce well-formed sentences, to use them in appropriate situations, to discern the variety

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[1]Communicative Competence: An Experiment in FL Teaching (Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development, Inc., 1972).

of subcodes and registers of a language and to employ them as demanded by external circumstances, as well as to engage skillfully in such forms of linguistic play as punning and banter. It represents a high level of attainment indeed, so high in fact as to be beyond the reasonable expectations of usual general FL courses.

Few advocates of the imparting of minimal communicative competence in general FL courses have recognized the need for thoroughgoing concomitant modifications. Sandra Savignon indicated that the approach she had experimented with required the following changes in the instructional setting: (1) higher proportion of time devoted to communicative competence; (2) the use of game and simulation techniques; (3) the use of native speaker resource persons; (4) a reinterpretation of the role of the teacher; (5) a restructuring of the classroom environment. But, in addition, the adoption of this new goal implied a revision of present curricular practices, notably extensive revision of syllabus design.

Following S. Pit Corder,[2] I am using the term syllabus to refer to the selection and the ordering of content units. Syllabus design follows the determination of course objectives and precedes the choice of pedagogical approach and classroom procedures.

In this article, I propose to discuss the incompatibility between the goal of communicative competence (defined more narrowly as minimal approximative communicative competence) and current practices of syllabus design and to suggest more relevant alternatives.

Traditional Syllabus Design

The syllabus design that underlies current FL materials and classroom practices is totally incompatible with the attainment of communicative competence. FL instruction is still dominated by the teaching of language structure for its own sake, and syllabus design practices give too central a place to structural features of language (phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical).

First, the number of features selected for presentation at any level is overwhelming and far beyond the capabilities of the

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[2] Introducing Applied Linguistics (Harmondsworth, Great Britain: Penguin, 1973).

learners to "cognize," let alone internalize them. Secondly, even in materials that adopt a situational format, the situation presented - usually in the form of a dialogue - serves primarily as a vehicle for the introduction of grammatical features that will be drilled in a particular unit. As Wilga Rivers remarks:

> They [situational dialogues seeded for grammatical features] lead naturally to grammatical explanations and intensive practice exercises through which the operation of the rule, or paradigm becomes clear to the student, enters his active repertoire, and is then used by him in a genuinely communicative interchange.[3]

She illustrates the "grammar-demonstration" dialogue with the following sample designed to present the present tense of the verb *aller:*

PAULE	Où vas-tu ce soir?
MADELEINE	Je vais en ville avec ma famille. Nous allons au cinéma.
PAULE	Qu'est-ce que vous allez voir?
MADELEINE	Zazie dans le Métro. Mes cousins vont voir le même film demain.

The grammatical seeding achieved is truly remarkable; except for the 3rd person singular for *va*, the entire present indicative paradigm is displayed in the dialogue. But does it illustrate an authentic French speech transaction? Hardly. For instance, every speech transaction has a goal. In this dialogue, Paule does not inquire about Madeleine's plans for the evening solely to provide her with the opportunity to rehearse the present indicative of *aller*. Does she wish to spend the evening with her? In that case, upon finding out that Madeleine is planning to go to the movies with her family, she might wish to be invited to join them. In any case, that Madeleine's cousins intend to see the same film is irrelevant. In natural use of language, speakers do not feel compelled to express their thoughts in complete sentences, and in fact seldom do so.

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[3]A Practical Guide to the Teaching of French (New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.22.

A more authentic example of a communicative act would be the following dialogue:

PAULE	Qu'est-ce que tu fais ce soir?
(Paule cannot assume that Madeleine is going out)	
MADELEINE	Je vais au ciné.
PAULE	Ah, bon. Quel film est-ce qu'on joue?
MADELEINE	Zazie dans le Métro.
PAULE	On dit que c'est un bon film. Je peux aller avec toi, si tu veux.
MADELEINE	Euh... C'est... C'est que j'y vais avec mes parents et aussi mon frère et ma soeur. Alors, euh, tu comprends...
PAULE	Bien, oui, je comprends. Pauvre vieille, tu ne vas pas t'amuser!

Some Problems of FL Syllabus Design

Syllabus design comprises two phases: the selection of appropriate items and the ordering of these items in the most efficient sequence. Selection is determined by course objectives, but ordering rests on independent psychological principles of second-language learning.

The determination of appropriate items

Currently, teaching syllabi are formulated in terms of situations, sets of lexical items, and grammatical features. The latter generally consist of formal features grouped in large chunks, for instance, definite determiners, interrogative structures, or present tense.

At present, descriptions of communicative competence are either illustrative or programmatic, and we have little knowledge about the types of units that underlie it. But it is clear that these do not correspond directly to the discrete features we posit to account for linguistic form: constructions, base or transformational rules, paradigms, or basic sentence patterns.

What is considered a single structure in current syllabi turns out to be very complex. Consider the so-called present tense in English. It assumes at least six different linguistic functions or meanings:

present state	This is John.
habitual	I shave every morning.
"timeless" truths	The earth rotates around its axis.
verbs of perception	This pie looks good.
timeless conditional sentences	I eat if I'm hungry.
future reference	Tonight I bring my books.

More appropriate for the imparting of communicative competence than features that refer to linguistic form are semantically-based categories such as time (past, present, or future; frequency, duration), quantification, modality, possession, and so forth.

Instead of teaching French future tense forms, say, the pedagogical objective becomes to equip the learner with the most easily acquired linguistic means to express the concept of futurity. This may be accomplished by the use of present tense forms accompanied by time adverbials such as *plus tard, bientôt, la semaine prochaine*, and so on or the immediate future constructed analytically by the combination of the present of *aller* and the infinitive. The introduction of the future tense, a relatively complex paradigm requiring for many verbs the memorization of a distinct future stem, may be deferred without limiting the learner's semantic range.

David Wilkins has developed the notional syllabus in which, in addition to semantic categories, modal categories and categories of social function are introduced.[4] The latter comprise suasion

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[4] "Notional analysis and the concept of adequate grammar," in Linguistic Insights in Applied Linguistics, S. Pit Corder and Eddy Roulet, eds. (Proceedings of the Second Neuchâtel Symposium in Applied Linguistics) (Brussels: AIMAV and Paris: Didier, 1974), pp. 119-28. For a detailed notional syllabus proposal, see also Daniel Coste et alia, Un niveau seuil (Strasbourg: Conseil de la Coöpération Culturelle de l'Europe, 1976).

(giving orders, making requests and suggestions), evaluation (signifying agreement, making accusations, or passing judgment), emotions (joy, pleasure, sadness, grief), and emotional relationships (expressing sympathy, hate, displeasure). In a French course, adherence to a notional syllabus would require the early introduction of such expressions and protocols as:

suasion:	voulez-vous ..., permettez-moi de ..., pourriez-vous ...;
evaluation:	d'accord, je suis d'accord, bon, je crois, je ne crois pas, je préfère, je vous suggère;
emotions:	bravo, quel malheur, heureusement, c'est regrettable;
and emotional relationships:	je suis heureux, content, triste, navré; je te plains, c'est bien fait pour lui.

The subjunctive, traditionally considered a difficult tense and ordinarily introduced in later stages of instruction, should be presented relatively early. Not all of the linguistic functions of this tense need be taught initially, but only those that enable the learner to express a basic set of emotions and emotional relationships. Modal categories refer to speaker comments, explicit or implicit, on the reliability of statements, to indication of personal commitment, and to the expression or intentions and volition. Typically, they are expressed by modal auxiliaries and in languages with highly inflected verb systems by the future and the conditional.

Corder points out that present syllabi fail to recognize the importance of textual syntactic features such as topicalization and focussing whose function is to highlight and underscore propositional arguments and which are usually manifested by clefting, extraposition and other permutations.

Compare:

Mary said that.	It's Mary that said that.
I don't like milk.	Milk, I don't like.
Everyone believes that Columbus was right.	That Columbus was right is believed by everyone.

Pedagogical ordering

Since no obvious unit related directly to communicative competence has emerged, we must seek to improve syllabus design by more appropriate sequencing of linguistic units. An optimal pedagogical ordering should lead the learner to acquire knowledge and control of linguistic features - both formal and functional (semantic) - most easily and in the shortest time. It should also enable him at any point in the sequence to participate in the largest number of speech transactions.

The assessment of the relative simplicity of pedagogical sequences is a complex matter. A distinction must be made between linguistic simplicity as determined by criteria of linguistic theory (economy, elegance, generality, and so on) and psycholinguistic simplicity based on the nature of second-language acquisition and the mental processing of linguistic and communicative information. It is the latter type of simplicity that bears directly on the problem of ordering of relevant units, but discussions have been couched usually in terms of linguistic simplicity. Four directions may be followed in attempting to gauge relative pedagogical simplicity of pedagogical sequences: (1) frequency and utility; (2) intralingual analysis; (3) language acquisition universals; (4) learner systems.

(1) Frequency and utility. Frequency and utility indices have proven of some usefulness in the selection of lexical items. There have been few attempts to apply these criteria to either the selection or the ordering of linguistic features. In traditional syllabi features presented very late appear, upon inspection, to represent those with lowest relative frequency of occurrence. But these comprise only 25 percent of features introduced. It is in ordering the other 75 percent of features that guiding principles are required.

(2) Intralingual analysis. When it first emerged more than two decades ago, contrastive analysis held bright promises for the determination of optimal learning steps, but the predictive power of that theory proved to be very low, and its contribution to the problem of pedagogical sequencing has been insignificant. Intralingual analysis, particularly when formulated in terms of the relative generality of processes and rules, represents a more promising direction of inquiry. Consider, for example, the ordering of French interrogative structures. That language, for all of its vaunted inherent logical quality, offers its speakers four linguistic alternatives for formulating questions:

	Yes/no questions	Information-eliciting (Qu) Questions
Type 1	intonation:	
	Tu vas au ciné?	Tu vas où?
Type 2	fronting:	
	———	Où tu vas?
Type 3	*est-ce que* adjunctions:	
	Est-ce que tu vas au ciné?	Où est-ce que tu vas?
Type 4	inversion:	
	Vas-tu au ciné?	Où vas-tu?

The first two types are sociolinguistically stigmatized and, predictably, do not appear in teaching materials, which, instead, exhibit a random mixture of *est-ce que* adjunction and inversion. The set of rules characterizing inversion questions is quite complex and imposes severe constraints on its use. For instance, in most cases, it cannot be used when the subject contains a noun phrase rather than a pronoun:

Est-ce que Jean part?	*Part Jean?
Est-ce qu'il part?	Part-il?
Quand est-ce que Jean est parti?	*Quand est parti Jean?

Instead, a pronominal copy of the subject noun must be introduced:

*Jean part-il?

*Quand Jean est-il parti?

It can be expected that, before they learn constraints on inversion, learners will overgeneralize the basic rule and produce

numerous errors. *Est-ce que* questions do not suffer any syntactic constraints and, further, since they are sociolinguistically neutral, they should be introduced first.

It should be noted that, from the point of view of communicative competence, the alternative interrogative structures of French are not equivalent. The first two, particularly Fronting (*Où va Jean?*), are considered ill-formed by certain native speakers, though they are among the most frequently employed variants in spontaneous conversation. The pragmatic and sociolinguistic restrictions on the use of the four variants is precisely the type of information that syllabus planners require in constructing French materials designed to impart near-native communicative competence.

(3) Language acquisition universals. Recent research in the acquisition of a language in a free-learning environment, particularly that of young children, points to the existence of universals common to all types of language acquisition. For instance, Dulay and Burt found that children learning English as a second language (ESL) learned certain basic grammatical features in an invariant order regardless of their language background.[5] Corder has hypothesized that features of restructuring found in diverse reduced language varieties (pidgins, foreigner talk, baby talk, second language learner interlanguage) are evidence for reversion, on the part of adolescents and adults, to a universal linguistic base.[6] Might not examination of these reduced varieties of language provide insights on a possible natural learning sequence?

Most interesting in this light are pidgins, more accurately, pidginized varieties of languages. These arise from mutual linguistic accommodation between native speakers and foreign learners in situations where there is little social integration between the two groups and where communicative pressures are high, as in transient trading contacts. Learners have reduced opportunities to acquire the fully formed and corrected version of the

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[5]Heidi C. Dulay and Marina K. Burt, "Natural sequences in child second language acquisition," Language Learning, 24 (1974), pp. 37-53.

[6]"'Simple codes' and the source of the Second Language Learner's initial heuristic hypothesis," in Theoretical Models in Applied Linguistics, eds., S. Pit Corder and Eddy Roulet (Proceedings of the Fourth Neuchâtel Symposium in Applied Linguistics) (Brussels: AIMAV and Paris: Didier; forthcoming).

target language. As a consequence, when compared with their lexical base language (for example, English in the case of Pidgin English), pidginized varieties show simplification of surface structure and reduction of inner form that parallel the reduction of the linguistic functions they assume. Four features of pidginization merit mention:

i. Replacement of inflectional endings by free forms (shift from synthetic to analytic expression of semantic categories);
ii. Elimination of redundant agreement and concord features;
iii. Invariant representation of formatives;
iv. Lexical reduction and the use of paraphrases and circumlocutions.

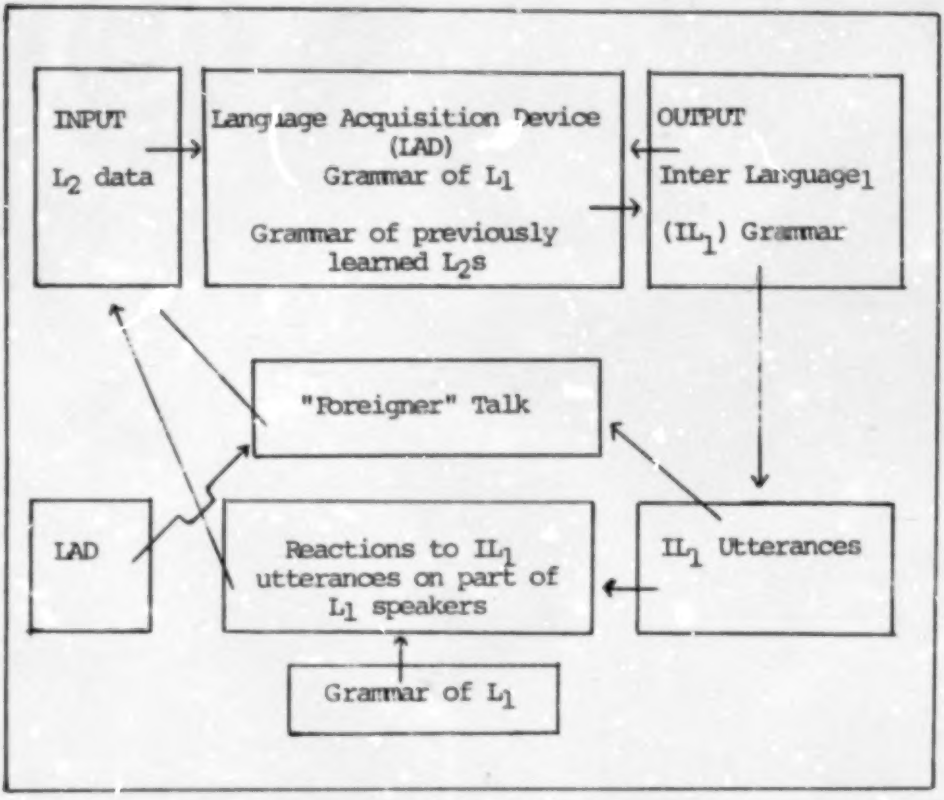
For example, in Papiamentu (a creole derived by pidginization from Portuguese and/or Spanish) tense-aspect and person reference are expressed by particles and pronouns occurring before the verb. Equivalent to Spanish *canto* is *mi ta canto* "I am singing"; equivalent to *cantaria* is *lo mi a canto* "I would sing." In all Romance-based pidgins and Creoles, gender distinctions are eradicated. The representation of interrogative adverbs and pronouns in African Pidgin English and Creole French illustrates the decomposition of complex morphemes into their semantic constituents. They are restructured as combinations of an invariant interrogative marker and an indefinite substitute: *Huskayn, ki jan* (what kind) "what," *husay, ki koté* (what place) "where," *hustaym, ki le* (what time, what hour) "when."

These natural means for the expression of semantic categories suggest that, in formal FL teaching, analytic features should be favored over ones in languages where these alternate. For example, in English, modal verb constructions such as *I am going, I will go,* and so on might even be presented provisorily instead of *I went,* even though it is stylistically, if not grammatically, deviant. In the teaching of French, the immediate future and the past indefinite (passé composé) should be presented before the corresponding inflected tenses, the imperfect and past definite (passé simple) and future, respectively. Compare, for example:

Inflected forms	Analytic constructions
je dis, je dirai	je dis, je vais dire
ils disent, ils diront	Ils disent, ils vont dire
je fais, je ferais	je fais, je vais faire
ils font, ils feront	ils font, ils vont faire

(4) The observation of learner systems. Today, leading research in second language acquisition starts from the model termed *Cognitive-Interactive* in Figure 1. It is widely held that learners' attempts to reproduce target language input data to which they are exposed do not reflect simply the interference from patterns and habits of their native tongue, but wholesale restructuring. Second-language learning is a cognitive process in that:

> ...[it] is not so much a question of acquiring a set of automatic habits, but rather a process of discovering rules, categories, and systems of choice in the language by some sort of processing by the learner of the data of the language presented to him by the teacher.[7]



(Figure 1)

Cognitive-Interactive Model of Second-Language Learning

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[7]S. Pit Corder, Introducing Applied Linguistics, pp 292-3.

The learner's "intake" from the input data and his processing of it are guided by various language acquisition and processing universals and by his linguistic experience - language and language varieties previously learned. Learner errors or, more appropriately, learners' recreated approximations to the target language, their interlanguage (approximative system, learner system) reflect this internal processing and the psychological structures that underlie it.

The model depicted in Figure 1 is also interactive in that it assumes the participation of speakers of the target language in the elaboration of the learner's interlanguage (IL). In other words, the type of second-language learning that occurs in a free-learning situation involves mutual accommodation between target language speakers and learners. The behaviour of native speaker participants in second-language learning transactions deserves study, for it may also shed light on aspects of natural sequencing. Even teachers, who often interfere with as much as they facilitate learning, intuitively modify the input data in the direction of simplicity.[8]

Learner errors, particularly those that can be shown to be independent of the subject's native tongue, provide invaluable hints for the sequencing of linguistic features. I have investigated American learners' reconstruction of French interrogative structures.[9] Input data to these learners contained only the *est-ce que* adjunction and inversion type questions (see 2. above). Analysis of questions generated by a speaking test revealed a high incidence of fronting-type questions *(Où tu vas?, Pourquoi il a dit ça?, Quand vous partez?)*. Since this type of error could not be explained as the effect of transfer of corresponding English structures, it was ascribed to the operation of restructuring processes. That construction was selected as the basic interrogative type and was introduced first in the syllabus.

As was pointed out, although it is sociolinguistically stigmatized, fronting is part of the communicative repertoire of French speakers, and thus does not constitute an absolute error.

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[8]In this connection, see Vera Hanzl, "Linguistic registers of Foreign Language Instruction," Language Learning, 23 (1973), pp. 207-22.

[9]Albert Valdman, "Error analysis and pedagogical ordering," in Some Implications of Linguistic Theory for Applied Linguistics, eds., S. Pit Corder and Eddy Roulet (Proceedings of the Third Neuchâtel Symposium in Applied Linguistics) (Brussels: AIMAV and Paris: Didier, 1975), pp. 105-38.

The introduction of the deviant construction resulted in more effective learning of the selected target construction, *est-ce que* adjunction, for responses of students who had followed the revised syllabus contained nearly 90 percent *est-ce que* questions.

The implementation of the type of syllabus outlined in this article implies wholesale modifications in the preparation of teaching materials and in teaching practices. To begin with, the number of grammatical features and vocabulary items presented for active mastery must be drastically reduced. Learners can attain a minimal level of communicative competence without using actively many of the features introduced in the average beginning and intermediate level FL courses. Nor need full paradigms or all aspects of syntactic constructions be presented when a grammatical feature is first introduced in the syllabus. For example, all beginning French texts set forth the full paradigms of verbs:

je prends	nous prenons
tu prends	vous prenez
il, elle, on prend	ils, elles prennent

In informal conversation, French speakers seldom use the *nous* form; instead, they employ *on* and the third person singular form. If the teacher chooses to postpone the use of the formal vs. informal address contrast, the *vous* form may be set aside. With regard to pronunciation, learners will need to handle only two forms: [prã] and [prɛn]. This initial reduction of form variation reduces intralinguistic interference, but, more importantly, by lessening the number of potential errors, it develops confidence and encourages learners to experiment in the use of the language. Progressive introduction of paradigms and constructions also leads to cyclicality in syllabus design: the re-introduction of part of a paradigm involves automatic review and it leads to better integration of related aspects of a language:

> ...in language, nothing is learned completely until everything is learned. If this is so, then no simple linear sequence for a syllabus is appropriate. A logical solution to this problem might seem to be a cyclic, or spiral, structure, which required the learner to return time and time again to some aspect of language structure, language process, or domain of language use, in order to discover how it relates and is integrated with some different part of language. FL is not just cumulative, it is an integrative process.[10]

[10] Introducing Applied Linguistics, p. 297.

We have seen that, in reduced and pidginized varieties of languages, there is a tendency to make forms fuller and more explicit and to reduce the inherent variation all languages show. In a learner-oriented teaching syllabus, comparable reduction of variation must also be effected. The learning of the forms of French is greatly complicated and slowed down by the phenomena of liaison and elision which, in effect, more than double the number of forms:

ils sont [sõ] là	ils sont [sõt] ici
ils vont [võ] partir	ils vont [võt] en France
nous sommes [sɔm] fatigués	nous sommes [sɔmz] embêtés
le [lə] garçon	où est le [l] garçon
votre [vɔt] frère	votre [votr] ami

At the beginning, only one of the alternating forms must be selected, the one not containing the liaison consonant and the fuller form containing the mute *e* the deletable [r]. Progressively, the variation that reflects the natural use of the language by native speakers may be introduced, first for passive recognition, then for "cognition," and finally for active use, but only after learners demonstrate confident use of the simplified, artificial classroom norm.[11]

Finally, a learner-oriented syllabus is incompatible with stringent correction of errors. Errors are in fact a necessary by-product of learning a FL; to correct inappropriately in the course of activities designed to lead to the communicative use of language not only reduces motivation but impedes learning.

In conclusion, a level and type of communicative competence appropriate for the beginning and intermediate FL classroom will be reached only by major changes in the design of syllabi and teaching materials and the adoption of teaching procedures consonant with that objective. In the area of syllabus design proper, it is urgent for FL methodologists and the specialists to

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[11] To deal with language variation, I have introduced the notion of pedagogical norm, see Albert Valdman, "Norme pédagogique: les structures interrogatives en français," International Journal of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching, 5 (1967), pp. 3-10.

which these turn for guiding principles (applied, socio- and psycho-linguists) to strive to find principled bases for the elaboration of "little" languages:

> ...[a language] within which the learner can take the initiative without producing too many errors. For wide coverage of language needs with minimum error production, each item in the little language should be psychologically justified, and should be easy to pronounce and spell, morphological features should be regular, and the items should enter into predictable syntactical relationships.[12]

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12. H.V. George. Common Errors in Language Learning (Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1972), p. 54.

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